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SCHILLER'S PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY.¹

[Friedrich Schiller's poetry became with his maturer years more and more philosophical, and as the most illustrious child of his muse we have published in April, 1911, his famous hymn "The Ideal and Life" which we hereby wish to complement with some pertinent remarks by one of the foremost Germanists of this country, Prof. Calvin Thomas of Columbia University, New York.—ED.]

The dominant note of Schiller's later poetry is intellectual seriousness; wherefore, if there be those for whom intellectual seriousness is not a quality of poetry at all, for them he has not written.

Of course his verse is self-revelation, without which poetry cannot be; but it is the revelation of a soul dwelling habitually in the upper altitudes of thought and emotion, and always assuming that fellow-mortals who care for poetry at all will be capable of a serious joy in the things of the mind.

One may say that his art as a poet consists not so much in the direct expression of feeling in sensuous and passionate language, as in the transfiguration of thought by means of impassioned imagery. In his poems as elsewhere he is a good deal of a rhetorician, but he is never insincere. His verse came from the heart, only it was the expression of character and convictions rather than of moods and fancies. It seems intended to edify rather than to portray; to impress rather than to delight. Some of it, too, is occupied with ideal sentiments so abstract and sublimated as to possess but languid interest for normally constituted lovers of poetry.

This last observation has in view more particularly the poems he wrote in the year 1795, while still "hugging the shore of philosophy." Take for example "The Veiled Image at Sais," which tells in rather prosaic pentameters of an ardent young truth-seeker who is escorted by an Egyptian hierophant to a veiled statue and told that whoso lifts the veil shall see the Truth. At the same time he is warned that the veil must not be lifted save by the consecrated hand of the priest himself. Moved by a curiosity which can hardly seem anything but laudable,—unless one is prepared to take the side of the sacerdotal humbug,—the young man returns in the night and raises the veil. In the morning he is found pale and uncon-

¹ See the author's *Life and Works of Schiller*, New York, Henry Holt & Company.

scious at the foot of the statue. Soon afterwards he dies, leaving to mankind the message:

“Woe unto him who seeks the Truth through Guilt.”

Far more interesting is the poem which was at first called “The Realm of Shades” and later “The Ideal and Life,”—a difficult production, which resembles “The Artists” in its suggestion of a voyage through the imponderable ether. We begin with the blessed gods in Olympus and end with the apotheosis of Hercules; and the intervening stretch is like the vasty realm of the Mothers in “Faust.” The poem is intellectual, in the sense that its theme is a concept of the mind, and its structure logical throughout; yet every strophe is surcharged with feeling, and the diction presents a marvelous wealth of imagery. It must be conquered by study before it can yield any great pleasure; but the conquest once made, one finds a noble delight in the gorgeous coloring with which Schiller invests his idealistic rainbow in the clouds. Good critics, favorable to Schiller’s genius, regard “The Ideal and Life” as the greatest of his philosophic poems and the most characteristic expression of his nature. He himself felt a sort of reverence for it. “When you receive this letter,” he wrote to Humboldt, “put away everything that is profane and read this poem in solemn quiet.” And Humboldt replied: “How shall I thank you for the indescribable pleasure that your poem has given me? Since the day on which I received it, it has in the truest sense possessed me; I have read nothing else, have scarcely thought of anything else.”

The general drift of the wonderfully pregnant verses is that man attains peace only by renouncing the things of sense and living in the realm of shades, that is, among eternal ideals. Here he is free—like the gods.

Throughout the poem “Beauty” is put for “the Ideal”; and we get a reflex of the philosophic doctrine that only the esthetic faculty can resolve the eternal conflict between the sensuous and the rational man. Life is and must be struggle, that being its very essence; but by taking refuge in the Realm of the Ideal, man anticipates his apotheosis. There he escapes from the tyranny of the flesh and the bondage of nature’s law. The misery of struggle and defeat no longer vexes him. The warring forces are reconciled and he sees their conflict under the aspect of eternal beauty. Thus, like the new-born god, Alcides, taking leave of the terrestrial battle-ground, he mounts into heaven, while the nightmare of the earthly life “sinks and sinks and sinks.”

All this may seem, at first blush, to attach excessive importance to the attainment of inward peace and harmony,—as if one's private comfort were the greatest thing in life. It *seems* to recommend a quietistic, contemplative life; for how else shall one escape from the actual into the ideal? Nevertheless it would be a great mistake to read into the poem anything like a recommendation of quietism. The ultimate goal is described in terms which suggest now the mythology of Homer, now the Platonic realm of ideals, and again the Christian heaven; but however the blessed existence is imaged, it is always thought of as attainable only through a strenuous grapple with the realities of this life. Thus the essential spirit of the poem is the spirit of energetic, hopeful endeavor. Its doctrine is, to quote the words of Kuno Francke, that "only through work are we delivered from the slavery of the senses"; that "the very trials and sufferings of mankind bring out its divine nature and insure its ultimate transition to an existence of ideal harmony and beauty."²

The doctrine, in its essence, was dear to Goethe, as well as to Schiller, and takes us into the holy-of-holies of their joint philosophy. What else did Goethe mean by his oft-reiterated preaching of renunciation, and by his well-known verses about "weaning oneself from the half and living resolutely in the whole, the good and the beautiful"? In his excellent book upon Diderot Mr. John Morley speaks somewhere of "that affectation of culture with which the great Goethe infected part of the world." Let it not be forgotten, however, in our latter-day contempt of culture, that the Weimar poets were great workers, and also, in their way, great fighters. They did not turn their attention—at least not directly—to the crushing of the Infamous, nor to any battle against social or political wrong. They fought rather for sanity, for good art, for philosophy; for those things which go to enrich and broaden the life of the individual. It was a good fight,—the best which, at their time, with their gifts, they could possibly have engaged in.

Schiller's fervid verses, recommending an escape from the bondage of sense to the free realm of the mind, correspond of course to nothing that is humanly feasible. The shackles of the flesh are upon us and there is no way to get rid of them. It is only an ideal, a poet's dream. Nevertheless the subject has a practical aspect which is definable in plain prose. It is found in the following passage from Goethe:

"We put one passion in place of another; employments, dilet-

² *Social Forces in German Literature*, p. 376.

tantisms, amusements, hobbies,—we try them all through to the end only to cry out at last that all is vanity. No one is horrified at this false, this blasphemous saying; indeed it is thought to be wise and irrefutable. But there are a few persons who, anticipating such intolerable feelings, in order to avoid all partial resignations, resign themselves universally once for all. Such persons convince themselves with regard to the eternal, necessary, law-governed order of things, and seek to acquire ideas which are indestructible and are only confirmed by the contemplation of that which is transient.”³

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PROBLEMS OF PURE FORM.

AN EDITORIAL DISCUSSION WITH M. LUCIEN ARRÉAT AND G. A. BLACK.

The Editor has received two comments on his exposition of the nature of mathematics. One comes from M. Lucien Arréat, who objects to the idea that the triangle is a product of three lines on the ground that it consists of a section of the plane bordered by three lines.

We translate from M. Arréat’s letter: “Is it quite correct to consider *lines* as *elements* which produce the triangle? By construction the lines bound a portion of space, but they do not produce this portion; they only define the figure conceived or indicate directions. Lines do not seem to me to be real in any different sense than the figure which they render visible to our eyes. They do not seem to me to be a quantity while the figure which they ideally define would be a quality. These remarks do not however in the least prevent us from studying the triangle as a type of form.”

Lines have qualities such as direction. The line consists of length without breadth or thickness, and lines can be measured quantitatively according to their length. When three or more lines intersect they produce geometrical figures, and these geometrical figures possess new qualities not to be derived from their elements which in this case are mathematical lines.

What M. Arréat calls the triangle is really the contents of the triangle, viz., its area enclosed by the sides. The character of the triangle consists of the direction and the length of its three sides

³ *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Bk. XVI.